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Julie Levinson, *The American Success Myth on Film*

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1

Given the persistence of the success myth in the US culture and social life, to write a book about the movie iterations of this key national myth seems, at first, quite a challenging endeavor. Just the vast number of films retelling the American idea of success would make this task almost unfeasible; and any such attempt would entail, quite surely, necessary omissions. This may explain why this compelling topic has received insufficient scholarly attention in film studies. Most often it has been a research interest in the representation of the working class in films that has inevitably steered film scholars into the study of the success myth.¹ Aware of the necessary limitations in her work, Julie Levinson, in *The American Success Myth on Film*, takes up this challenge by assuming a structuralist approach to myth. Initially elaborated by Claude Lévi-Strauss and later adopted by (film) scholars like Robert Ray and Richard Slotkin, this theory claims that in any given culture, the function of myth is to reconcile apparently incompatible forces. In the first chapter and introduction of the book, Levinson, apart from presenting the theories informing her work, also traces the historical evolution of the success myth in the US before the consolidation of cinema – from its origins in the social and religious doctrines of colonial America to the early twentieth-century consumer culture and its associated hedonistic ethic – to highlight the evolution of the ideals of success over time as well as the endurance of the myth's irreconcilable contradictions between material and spiritual fulfillment, domesticity and mobility, individuality and community, work and leisure. From the 1920s to the present American movies have played a key role in disseminating the success myth and its ideological tensions. Assuming this crucial

function of films, this work is organized around the central idea that movies have both perpetuated and challenged the American idea of success.

2

To study how cinema deals with questions about the nature of success and negotiates its complexities, Levinson selects films about mobility, the corporate workplace, gender roles and unemployment to be analyzed in the subsequent four chapters. Unified by a common theme, the films surveyed in each chapter range from a variety of eras and genres and follow different organizing patterns. Thus, in Chapter 1, Levinson acknowledges the wide gamut of film genres encompassing “both the best aspirations and the worst anxieties” of the American success ethos, but her main interest in the book is to stress how films identify and articulate its incongruities rather than highlight its often forceful reconciliation in the conventional narrative happy endings (19).

In the film analyses of this work, Levinson acknowledges the importance of genre to identify the variations of certain structural conventions, visual tropes and moods in film cycles conveying the complexities of success, but she does not adopt this approach in a systematic way. References to various generic conventions serve the main purpose of her analyses, that is, to stress the success myth contradictions, but they also hint to ideas that elicit further examination.

3

In Chapter 2, “Moving Up and Moving On: Mobility and the American Success Myth,” Levinson examines the various routes of mobility and self-making taken in film narratives through a lengthy and detailed study of well-chosen films to exemplify each one of them. However enriching and interesting, these analyses use diverse methodologies: From the thorough examination of a single film, *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006), to critique the way class and race are treated in the film, to the genre studies approach used in her otherwise interesting contribution to gangster films. In line with Robert Warshaw’s work on gangster movies as “the inversion of the success myth” (45), Levinson claims that they offer the most virulent critique of the success ethos by exposing the contradictions between the obligation to succeed and the impossibilities to do so. The various sections in this chapter, dealing with the five main paths she identifies (“the dream defined,” “the dream deferred,” “the rise-and-fall pattern,” “class passing and voluntary downward mobility,” and “marrying up”), focus on films of diverse generic nature, released in different periods but revealing common thematic concerns and anxieties about success. Although Levinson stresses the idea that the success myth is “historically contingent and ideologically fraught,” her work does not emphasize its contextual difference, how these movies “speak to their zeitgeist,” but how they “speak to perennial American aspirations and anxieties” (62). For the author, the pressing question is not “how myth changes with times but why it changes so little” (63). In this sense, this research work shares, to

some extent, the same statism that the myth itself, by definition, purports to convey. However, in pointing at, rather than exploring, the connection between films and the sociohistorical contingencies from which they emanate, this work also leaves open further research paths to follow.

4

Interestingly, the remaining three chapters are organized chronologically in order to substantiate the fixity and persistence of the success myth rather than to stress its variations and evolution. All three of them expand on the contradictory ideologies disturbing the success myth's basis by focusing on the highly praised American work ethic with its underlying belief in the individual capacities to move up socially. Thus, Chapter 3 explores the corporate workplace film by identifying visual and narrative conventions across generic lines in various historical periods through an analysis of a wide range of films. Diminishing the importance of the often-contrived resolutions of the films' narrative endings, Levinson centers her arguments on the ambiguity and anxiety at the core of these films, which however are part of an ongoing American discourse and reflect the essential tension between work, success and self-worth, between material and spiritual fulfillment. Particularly interesting are the sections where Levinson signals the ideological evolution of ambition, competition, greed, macho posturing and the paternalism of corporate life through films in their response to the dominant economic contexts of specific eras.

5

Chapter 4 expands the important role of work in the creation of individual and collective identities by focusing on its interconnection with gender and success in Hollywood films. A brief examination of some feminist film theories, the history of the feminist movement, as well as the growing participation of women in the workforce lead Levinson to denounce the punishment of women in cinema for their professional ambition, in a surprisingly oppositional response to the ever-increasing female workforce and ethos on working women in the last few decades. A special attention to the social impact of second-wave feminism serves to examine how films have responded to the social disorientation created by changing gender roles in narratives that relate the dissatisfaction of professional men at midlife.

6

The myth's ideological inconsistencies contained in these films are further foregrounded in films that glorify unemployment, examined in the book's last chapter. Here Levinson traces a historical tradition of cinematic hobos incarnating a radical form of US American individualism, which is another national ideology in clear conflict with the traditional work ethic underlying the success myth, that in the analyzed films serves to bypass a more direct deployment of class and the hardships of unemployment.

7

The book's methodological irregularities and necessary caveats mentioned above do not undermine its valuable contribution to the study of one of the most central and enduring national myths in the US that cinema has largely contributed to disseminate. A thorough research of movies dealing with the success myth would not only be "encyclopedic," as Levinson herself acknowledges(18), but would extend beyond the US national confines. A clear and elegant prose and a neat organization makes the reading of this book a rewarding and pleasurable experience to everyone interested in US American culture and cinema.

NOTES

i. A recent work studying this connection is Jack Boozer's *Career Movies: American Business and the Success Myth*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002.

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